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ABSTRACT

With new knowledge and tools at their disposal, educators at all levels are exploring alternatives to ability grouping in order to improve schooling for all students. Bringing about positive results requires the development and utilization of knowledge about how ability grouping affects schools, exploration of beliefs that support grouping, and identification of the educational tools and techniques that make alternative practices possible. Implementation of alternatives to ability grouping include more than the regrouping of students from homogeneous to heterogeneous groups. Rather, what is needed is whole-school reform, requiring educators to investigate and adapt a variety of new approaches to curriculum and instruction in the classroom. Curriculum and instruction resources developed expressly for heterogeneous groups emphasize thinking skills, cultural perspectives, and high expectations for all students. Successful school reform depends on demonstrating to different interest groups that children will not be harmed and will indeed benefit from alternatives to ability grouping without diluting the curriculum. Professional development for teachers and leadership pulling together the necessary knowledge and tools make implementing alternatives to ability grouping possible. (Contains 9 references.) (LL)

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What Next? Promoting Alternatives to Ability Grouping

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WHAT NEXT? PROMOTING ALTERNATIVES TO ABILITY GROUPING

Anne Wheelock
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There is no longer any doubt: Ability grouping is harmful to children. Ability grouping hurts individual children by denying them opportunities for the rich, meaningful learning that contributes to improved chances for social and economic security later in life. Ability grouping also hurts communities and the larger society by segregating those labeled "more able" from those labeled "less able," institutionalizing divisions between the "haves" and "have-nots," and perpetuating the false assumption that a limited number of children can achieve at high levels. It is no secret that these harmful consequences of ability grouping fall most heavily on African-American, Latino, immigrant, and poor children.

Increasing numbers of parents, citizens, and educators are recognizing the problems of ability grouping. Like them, you may be:

- A parent concerned about ability grouping in your community's schools--but worried that your child who receives the best marks in the class will miss out on the special opportunities she now has or that your shy and uncertain child will be overwhelmed outside of his specialized setting.

- A teacher uncomfortable with the job of sorting children into "high," "middle," and "low" groups and making recommendations for the few students who will go on to the high school "honors" classes--but worried that you and your colleagues are unprepared for classes any more diverse than they already are?

- A principal or superintendent concerned about your school or district using ability grouping practices that reflect existing racial and socioeconomic cleavages in your community--but uncertain how to convince teachers, school board members, and parents to abandon entrenched sorting and grouping practices in favor of workable alternatives that ensure that *all* students have equal access to the educational opportunities provided by the school or district.

- A legislator, school board member, or average taxpayer inclined to think that your community's schools could do a lot better with a lot more children--but undecided about whether the necessary changes are affordable given the scarce resources and tax-scrimping mindset of the times.

Given these dilemmas, what can be done? Can we eliminate ability grouping to bring about both excellence and equity?

KNOWLEDGE, BELIEFS, TECHNIQUES

With new knowledge and tools at their disposal, more and more educators at all levels are now exploring alternatives to ability grouping in order to improve schooling for all students. They are struggling to come up with new ways in which their school structures and routines can include rather than exclude students to provide more meaningful learning for *all* in heterogeneous classrooms rather than for a few in segregated settings. Their experiences--both successes as well as mistakes--suggest that bringing about positive results requires developing and using knowledge about how ability grouping affects schools, exploring the beliefs that support ability grouping, and identifying the educational tools and techniques that make alternative practice possible. Finally, the art of implementing alternatives to ability grouping involves weaving these elements of knowledge, beliefs, and techniques together in a way that is politically acceptable--a process as varied as each community and school.

What guidelines do these experiences of implementing alternatives to ability grouping in schools offer?

Knowledge and Information

Successful implementation of alternatives to ability grouping takes thought, research, and investigation so that everyone begins with a common understanding of the effects of current

school practices and the changes that are possible. We suggest the following steps to acquiring the necessary knowledge and information:

1. Learn what research says about ability grouping and investigate alternatives endorsed by professional and citizens groups.

Begin with a good research summary such as ***Why Ability Grouping Must End: Achieving Excellence and Equity in American Education*** by JoMills Braddock and Robert Slavin, (included in the program packet) or "Curriculum Differentiation: Opportunities, Outcomes and Meanings," by Jeannie Oakes, Adam Gamoran and Reba N. Page (in the ***1992 Handbook of Research on Curriculum***), which describe how ability grouping results in a system that offers different educational experiences to different groups of students and influences student achievement, self-esteem, expectations, and aspirations. Then read the overview of innovative school practices found in ***Making the Best of Schools: A Handbook for Parents Teachers and Policymakers*** by Jeannie Oakes and Martin Lipton. Descriptions of effective practices for heterogeneous classrooms may also be found in such journals as ***Educational Leadership*** or ***Cooperative Learning***. You will learn that most experts agree that ability grouping has proved harmful for the most vulnerable children, has contributed to within-school segregation, has lowered expectations for most students, and has denied access to higher levels of learning to many. You will also learn that new instructional practices and ways of organizing curriculum make ability grouping increasingly unnecessary. Many educational leaders and advocates actively oppose ability grouping, including such organizations as the Quality Education for Minorities Project, the National Middle Schools Association, the National Education Association, the National Association of Advocates for Students, the National Coalition of Education Activists, and the Carnegie Endowment for Children.

2. Learn all you can about the consequences of your school and district policies related to ability grouping practices.

Identify the number of different levels or track groupings at elementary, middle, and high school levels. Review your school/district policies on how children are placed in specific programs (including special education and gifted and talented programs, honors, general, and basic classes) and how standardized test scores are used for grouping students. Determine by race how many children are retained in each grade. Identify any programs or tracks that are identified by race or ethnic group. Determine the percentage of students by race in particular courses that serve as "gatekeepers" for course sequences that lead to further opportunity, including the percentage of students enrolled in Algebra 1 in eighth and ninth grades. Analyze your school's or district's graduation rates and opportunities for attending post-secondary education for students in different programs and groups.

3. Identify any classrooms or schools in your district (or in similar districts) that are successfully implementing alternatives to ability grouping.

Across the country, knowledgeable educators are using innovative curricula and instruction in heterogeneous classes. However, these efforts are not always well publicized. You may be able to locate such efforts by calling schools in your district or by talking to parents whose children attend different schools. Visit the schools and classrooms you identify and talk to the principal and teachers to learn more about their motivation and preparation for trying new approaches. Investigate different kinds of approaches to heterogeneous grouping such as two-way bilingual classes, classrooms integrating children with disabilities with "typical" students, and classrooms that blend students who test at all levels on traditional testing measures. Some

of these alternatives are described in ***Crossing the Tracks: How "Untracking" Can Save America's School*** by Anne Wheelock.

4. Communicate your findings and recommendations for change to others concerned about ability grouping.

Identify all those who need to learn about the negative effects of ability grouping, including parents (especially parents of students enrolled in Chapter 1 programs, special education programs, or so-called "general" tracks), school administrators, teachers, school board members, and citizens groups. Make plans to convey your findings to all of them. Consider calling meetings of concerned parents and presenting your findings at meetings of organized groups. Some groups of educators, parents, and citizens have formed coalitions with community and citizen organizations and presented Saturday conferences so that more people can learn about ability grouping and alternatives to it.

Establishing a common base of information is a first step toward change. The challenge remains to *use* that knowledge, and that takes further steps.

Beliefs and Assumptions

Many educators who have studied and worked in schools that practice ability grouping have concluded that the belief system of educators in our schools makes a difference as to whether a school continues to group students by percieved ability or begins to implement some alternatives. Consequently, as Jeannie Oakes and Martin Lipton ("Detracking Schools: Early Lessons from the Field," *Phi Delta Kappan,* February 1992) observe, the process of implementing alternatives to ability grouping involves "a critical and unsettling rethinking of fundamental educational norms." They note:

> This rethinking asks people to challenge their entrenched views of such matters as human capacities, individual and group differences, the purposes of schooling, and the ever-present tensions between the norms of competitive individualism and the more democratic norms of support and community (p. 449).

Other educators like David Silvernail and Jody Capelluti ("An Examination of the Relationship Between Middle Level School Teachers' Grouping Preferences and Their Sense of Responsibility for Student Outcomes," *Research in Middle Level Education, 15*(1), Fall 1991) believe that taking time for teachers to discuss school values and norms regarding these issues, as well their beliefs about their own responsibility for teaching all students, is a critical step to take *prior* to adopting alternatives.

We suggest a few topics for beginning these discussions:

1. In early and ongoing discussions about what teachers, parents, students, and citizens believe about the nature of human intelligence and learning, consider:

- How do we define intelligence in theory and practice? Is human intelligence fixed and limited? What conditions are required to extend the capacity of human beings to learn at high levels?
- How important to student achievement is "ability" in comparison to "effort?"
- Do teachers believe that it is their responsibility to ensure that all students learn?
- What support do teachers need to learn new approaches, to teach in nurturing and challenging ways, and to take risks?
- What do we believe all students need to know and to be able to do to ensure a secure future?

2. In early and ongoing discussions about what teachers, parents, students, and citizens believe about the purposes of public education and opportunity in a democracy, consider:

- What is the purpose of public schools in a democracy?
- Is it the job of teachers to make decisions about which students will benefit from which opportunities?

- Are some students more "deserving" than others of what public education has to offer?
- Is classroom and school diversity--academic, racial, ethnic, economic--considered an asset for learning or an insurmountable hurdle?
- What does learning in settings which include a diversity of learning have to do with achievement in a democracy?
- What learning is important to expand opportunity for future success?
- What do we believe about education as a resource? Can we imagine "enough" for everyone--whatever their background, wherever they live--or are we nagged by the possibility that excellent schooling is a scarce resource to be apportioned first to those we deem most likely to benefit?

These questions are as important as they are complex and difficult. The responses together address the larger question: "Education for what?" The answers that each school develops also shape the structures and routines that are fashioned as an alternative approach to ability grouping. Taking time to think about these questions is a critical part of a broader professional development commitment necessary for successfully implementing alternatives to ability grouping. The answers delineate a context for adopting these alternatives that will lead to more meaningful schooling for all students.

Tools and Techniques

Fortunately in the case of implementing alternatives to ability grouping, where there is a will, there *is* a way! In fact, there are a number of ways. These alternatives are much more than the regrouping of students from homogeneous groups into heterogeneous groups. It is truly whole-school reform, requiring educators to investigate and adapt a variety of new approaches to curriculum and instruction in the classroom. Increasingly such resources are available including, for example, curriculum and instruction that is:

- Developed expressly for heterogeneous groups, frequently organized around themes or concepts, involving resources geared to engage all facets of human intelligence, and requiring cooperative learning of diverse students working in small groups.

- Organized to emphasize thinking skills--comprehension, application of concepts, analysis and classification of information, synthesis, evaluation--as well as basic knowledge in subject areas.

- Infused with the variety of cultural perspectives found in the real world.

- Characterized by teachers' interventions that communicate high expectations equally for all students while responding to different needs of different students.

- Builds on the experiences of all students in the classroom and emphasizes students' strengths.

- Engages students in project work that generates products suitable for exhibitions.

Sometimes these approaches are developed by individual teachers. Sometimes schools choose to purchase packaged curricula that meet these standards. Whatever the approach, implementation is almost always easier when it is executed by teams of teachers within a school with their involvement and adaptation. Implementing alternatives to ability grouping is not something a teacher can do alone. What is most crucial to implementation is a commitment to professional development for all teachers.

Thinking and Acting Politically

Implementing alternatives to ability grouping is a complicated process, in part because it involves changing so many aspects of school life, but also because it must engage different constituencies with different interests. Schools do not operate apart from a broader political context. Like other organizations, schools are subject to a variety of formal and informal laws, regulations, and organizational arrangements that often reflect a long history of compromises and

accommodations to different interest groups. Constituencies representing children labeled "gifted and talented" or "educationally exceptional" exist in every community. Likewise, for some school personnel, their mission and identity are based on structures that identify these children and educate them in exclusive settings.

Successful school reform depends on demonstrating to these constituencies that their children will not be harmed and will benefit from alternatives to ability grouping. The idea is not to dilute the curriculum but to make the types of learning opportunities presently available to high achieving youngsters accessible to all. In many communities, implementing alternatives to ability grouping does result in the withdrawal of some parents from the school or district. But many of these schools have enhanced their credibility and kept disruption to a minimum by paying attention to a few basic do's and don't's, or bewares. Some lessons from the experience of these schools are:

- **DO** become familiar with common arguments in favor of ability grouping and have responses prepared. **BEWARE** of the inclination to think that everyone will automatically be convinced that change is desirable and necessary just because research and "right" are on your side.

- **DO** make a plan for untracking that involves teachers. **BEWARE** of a plan made "from above," announced in June for implementation in September, and omitting any time or resources for professional development.

- **DO** consult with and inform all parents early in the planning stages; identify parent support, and be prepared for tough questions from opponents. **BEWARE** that rumors not backed up by information circulate fast.

- **DO** introduce changes in grouping, curriculum, and instruction in phases, allowing for feedback to the whole school and opportunities for modification. **BEWARE** of implementation that assumes school reform will take place all in one year.

- **DO** begin by peeling off the lowest tracks from the ability grouping hierarchy. **BEWARE** of plans that eliminate the top track or that move from three levels to two levels by dividing the middle level into high and low groups.

- **DO** begin with the most enthusiastic teachers who are sold on the idea. **BEWARE** that teachers commandeered into teaching heterogeneous classes can undermine success through in-class labeling, differential treatment of students within the classroom, or failure to accommodate individual differences in curriculum and instruction.

- **DO** consider ways to encourage risk-taking among teachers and to make it safe to try new approaches. **BEWARE** of policies or practices that make classroom innovation a high-stakes game for teachers.

- **DO** continue to circulate information about alternatives to ability grouping, publicize your successes throughout your implementation effort, and enlist your students in describing their experiences to parents and teachers. **BEWARE** that some teachers and parents may harbor residual skepticism or hostility until the benefits of the alternatives are demonstrated conclusively.

All these steps require stability and clear leadership in each school to sustain momentum for change, to articulate in the community the goals of the alternatives to ability grouping and to protect risk-taking teachers in each school from opposition to change.

GUIDELINES FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF ACADEMICALLY AND RACIALLY HETEROGENEOUS SCHOOLING

In summary, the experiences of implementing alternatives to ability grouping in schools suggest that finding positive answers to a number of key questions can boost chances for success. These answers will make schools places that guarantee that all students will have access to knowledge and opportunity for success. As you consider beginning the process of school change, keep these questions in mind:

- Has everyone in your school community--administrators, teachers, school board members, and parents--taken time to discuss the values and assumptions behind

grouping practices, to investigate the impact these assumptions have on students, and to consider alternative ways of thinking about students' capacities for learning? Does everyone understand that the alternatives involves more than the changing of grouping practices, including changes in classroom curriculum and instruction and school routines?

- Does your school have a schoolwide plan for grouping, curricular, and instructional reforms and the commitment to review the plan on a regular basis to assess progress and make changes? Do policymakers understand that school reform is a multi-year process, and are they willing to make a commitment to the resources and an accountability process that accounts for at least a five-year process?

- Is everyone in the school prepared to communicate high expectations for success to all students? Are the expectations formerly reserved for students assigned to "top group" classes extended to all students?

- Will the interesting content, pace, and rigor of the "top group" curriculum be implemented in heterogeneous classes without watering it down?

- Will teachers be participating in on-going professional development in preparation for using instructional methods that make high-level learning accessible to all?

- Will new approaches emphasize student-student and teacher-student collaboration and allow the intensity of learning to vary with the interests of students while challenging all to maximize their effort?

- Will your school back up the commitment to high expectations with concrete resources and opportunities so that low achieving students receive assistance that is directly tied to success in the high-expectations curriculum?

- Will your school make the changes necessary to keep students from falling behind, especially in subjects where building blocks of learning are sequential?

- Will the school offer additional help through "double-dose" scheduling, after-school or before-school tutoring, or "pre-teaching"?

- Will your school maximize opportunities for positive interracial and interethnic contact among students in all aspects of school life, both academic and extracurricular?

- Has your school taken steps to eliminate labeling in school communications and routines?

The elimination of ability grouping practices that deny children equal access to a rich, meaningful education is not easy, but it is a goal worth pursuing. The combination of a group of informed educators, parents, policymakers, and citizens acting together for the benefit of all children, broad discussion of the purposes of education in a democracy, professional development to support teachers prepared to implement new approaches to curriculum and instruction, and wise, politically-savvy leadership pulling together the necessary knowledge and tools is a formula that makes implementing alternatives to ability grouping not only desirable, but possible.

Resources

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